

AI Index: PRE 01/279/2008
11 November 2008

Gambia: Government must stop repression

(Abuja) African leaders and the international community must put pressure on the Gambian authorities to stop using their security forces as a tool for repression, Amnesty International said today as it launched a report on the human rights situation in Gambia. The report launch coincides with the meeting of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights being held in Abuja, Nigeria, between 10 and 24 November.

"We urge the African Commission to address the human rights situation in Gambia as a priority and adopt a resolution that would help end torture, arrests and killings by the local security forces. We urge all African leaders to put pressure on Gambia to end the long-standing culture of impunity for human rights violations in the country," said Tania Bernath, Amnesty International's Gambia Researcher.

In the 14 years that President Yahya Jammeh has been in power, six foiled coup attempts have been reported. The most recent one was in March 2006 and led to the arrest of at least 59 people, many of whom were subjected to unlawful detention and unfair trials, some tortured or even extrajudicially executed.

The report '[Gambia: Fear rules](#)' documents human rights violations by the army, the National Intelligence Agency and the police which the government has used to stifle dissent, particularly following the March 2006 coup attempt. The report is based on interviews conducted with victims of human rights abuses in Gambia between October 2007 and September 2008.

In the report Amnesty International raises the cases of at least 30 people who have been detained without charge. Many do not have access to their families or lawyers and are exposed to poor conditions in Mile 2 prison.

The organization also highlights the government's disrespect for the rule of law and the judiciary makes the fight against impunity an uphill battle in Gambia. Lawyers are reluctant to take on human rights cases for fear of reprisals and families of victims are afraid to speak out. The media, for the most part, censors itself in the face of arrests, fines, threats and physical attacks on those accused of criticizing the government. All public protests have ceased.

One human rights defender told Amnesty International: "Once you are arrested [in Gambia], you are out of the protection of the law and are subject to all kinds of human rights violations from the police, the army, and the National Intelligence Agency."

"Fear now reigns in Gambia where any person considered to be a perceived enemy of the government is at

risk of being arrested, tortured and even killed,” said Tania Bernath. “We urge the Gambian government to incorporate international human rights law and standards into national law, to stop the use of torture and extrajudicial executions and to release all those detained without charge.”

Furthermore, Amnesty International is calling on the government to investigate allegations of torture, ill-treatment, illegal detentions and disappearances, make the findings public and bring those suspected of being responsible to justice.

Other organizations echo these calls for action. “The international community and African Union members must not turn a blind eye to the situation in Gambia. They must bring pressure to bear on the Gambian authorities to ensure the government takes its international human rights obligations seriously,” said Adetokunbo Mumuni, Executive Director of the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project.

“If the African Commission adopted a resolution on Gambia it would be an important step to ensure greater respect for human rights in Gambia, and a reminder to the government to act in good faith to end the entrenched culture of impunity in the country, which is fuelling further human rights violations,” said Stella Amadi from the Centre for Democracy and Development.

Note to editors

Due to the high risk of reprisals against those who have spoken to Amnesty International, many of the testimonies in the report are anonymous. Interviews with individuals were often conducted outside Gambia to ensure their safety.

Amnesty International is working with a coalition of national and international non-governmental organizations to ensure that a country-specific resolution on Gambia is adopted at the Africa Commission on Human and People’ Rights. These organizations include the Open Society Justice Initiative (OSJI), Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP), the Women Advocates Research and Documentation Center (WARDC), and the Media Foundation for West Africa. The African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights has its headquarters in Gambia.